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ABSTRACT

Many instructors are planning to teach their writing classes in the networked computer classroom. Through the use of electronic mail, course listservs, and chat programs, the instructor is offered the opportunity to facilitate a more egalitarian classroom discourse that creates a strong sense of community, not only between students, but also between students and instructors. Unfortunately, some inflammatory and offensive discourses appear over the network, including such words as "bitch" or "fag." Another far more subtle and far more problematic discourse also exists which does not necessarily seek to offend, but does seek to create a patriarchal discourse within the proposed egalitarian network. The networked classroom, with its emphasis on the student, its de-emphasis on the instructor, and its filtration of social and linguistic context clues allows for an open and safe discourse. Instructors should guide discussions by first-year students by: creating an initial context for the discussion, setting norms, setting agenda, recognizing and prompting the participants, "meta-commenting," or dealing with problems in context, and waiting for a period of time before responding on-line, allowing time for reflective thought. In an effort to confront offensive and oppressive language, many universities have imposed both friendly speech codes and network usage agreements. Contains 24 references. (CR)

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Locating Hate Speech in the Networked Writing Classroom

ED 401 557

Like many graduate students in rhetoric and composition, I'm being enticed into teaching next semester's writing classes in the networked computer classroom. While some obvious reasons exist for wanting to teach in "the lab," such as the increased presence and importance of technology in society, as well as the always unpredictable job market, most of the enticement comes from the sense that the networked classroom can contribute to the weakening of the authoritative position of the teacher, to the empowerment of the student, and, most importantly, to a discourse that provides room for academically and socially marginalized voices that the traditional patriarchal classroom tends to ignore. In short, the networked computer classroom, particularly through the use of e-mail, course listservs, and chat programs, offers the opportunity for the instructor to facilitate a more egalitarian classroom discourse that creates a strong sense of community between not only students, but also students and instructors (Barker & Kemp, 1990; Faigley, 1992; Hawisher & Selfe, 1991; Selfe, 1990). It's not surprising that more and more instructors and students are willing to toss out the lectern and the chalkboard for a monitor, some telephone wire, and a keyboard.

It also isn't surprising, unfortunately, to hear and read some of the inflammatory and offensive discourses that appear over the network. "Bitch," "dyke," "femi-nazi," "fag" and "homo" are just some of the words which have offended a broader audience through the computer network. I was prepared to confront these words, to turn them into lessons in language and audience and socially constructed misrepresentations of cultural roles. I would force the students to reflect on their use of this discourse and question the values behind the society which produced the word. But I also noticed a discourse develop over the network which was far more subtle and far more problematic; a discourse that exists somewhere between the permanence of print and the fluidity of speech. It develops in a course listserv, where a male student publicly asks a female student for her phone number. It also exists in chat programs, where a female's questions are consistently ignored or disregarded. It develops in MOO sites, where a female is assumed a male unless she can prove otherwise. It is a discourse which doesn't necessarily seek to offend; however, it is a discourse which seeks to recreate a patriarchal discourse within the proposed egalitarian network.

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Because more and more instructors and students are plugging into the networked classroom, we need to be prepared to reserve and defend this space for a more egalitarian discourse. To do so, we need to create a new context for understanding and dealing with issues of speech as they transfer from the context of a patriarchal discourse to the proposed egalitarian discourse of the network. While many practitioners of networked classrooms are inviting us into their world of egalitarian learning, few are warning us of the work and practice involved in facilitating this type of atmosphere. Fewer still are providing us with the pedagogical tools we need in order to understand the variety of discourses present in the network and to orchestrate them into an open, safe and egalitarian discussion. As instructors who are concerned about preparing our students for communicating in an increasingly networked society, we need to address the problems of language as they arise in our classrooms, for they will surely surface when students participate in social networks outside of the academy. This paper attempts to provide instructors with a framework for understanding and demystifying offensive and oppressive discourse that is likely to occur in the networked classroom

As we prepare to use these technologies in our classrooms, it is important for us to understand how a networked classroom may facilitate both an egalitarian discourse and a discourse which offends and oppresses. I also believe it is important for us to make a distinction between the offensive language that is exaggerated by the technology (Regan) and the type of oppressive, patriarchal language that emerges through the technology (Forman, 1994). The distinctions are subtle, but they are important to understand, for they provide a framework for interpreting and discussing the comments which we or our students find to be obstacles on the road towards communal learning. The distinctions also allow us to develop pedagogical tools to incorporate this speech into an open and safe discourse.

We should start by realizing that the very features which allow the network to facilitate an open and safe discourse also may facilitate a discourse that is potentially quite offensive and quite oppressive. According to Cynthia Selfe, "When English teachers allow students to contribute to conversations about texts and discourse in electronic forums . . . they provide the important opportunity for alternative conversations in which communication can take place under some different social and cultural rules than

those that limit our current educational system" (p. 132). While we might be able to create a sight of discourse that is open and safe for all voices, it is equally important to understand how the network's undeveloped and unstructured social and cultural rules may facilitate a discourse that intimidates, offends, and oppresses the very students that it intends to liberate. According to Regan, "We imagine that once free from bodily constraints (beyond typing speed and facility with language), we and our students will find a new freedom of expression; yet, instead of serving as a tool of liberation, the computer medium can become a tool of oppression " (p. 12), particularly when students (and instructors) are merely transferring patriarchal norms from the classroom into the network.

It is important for us to understand how the networked classroom, with its emphasis on the student, its de-emphasis on the instructor, and its filtration of social and linguistic context cues may allow for an open and safe discourse. There are reasons, of course, as to why the networked computer lab lends itself to a "utopian dream" (Faigley, p. 167) of shared authority and empowerment in the composition classroom. One reason is that an instructor is moved away from a physical position of authority during discussion, thus allowing the students to see their class discussions as student-centered rather than instructor-centered. Carolyn Boiarsky (1990) maintains that certain physical characteristics of a networked computer classroom, such as the placement of desks and the uniformity of equipment and software, facilitates an alteration in the positions of power and channelization of discourse, thus providing a better opportunity for students to engage in an open form of participation. In the networked classroom, the instructor is no longer the person who is the center of discourse by virtue of privileged physical placement or the privileged use of technology. In fact, she is likely to be operating at the same desks, monitors, and keyboards as her students. Barker and Kemp concur with Boiarsky by acknowledging that the instructors "removal from the *position* of authority at the front and from the transactional switchboard greatly increases the role of individual students as knowledge-makers and empowered participants in the discourse of the community (as defined by the network)" (p. 17). The removal of the teacher from the physical position of authority inherently rejects teacher-centered patriarchal pedagogy and privileges a

"communal process of knowledge making" (p.21) in which the students see themselves as the collective center of class activities (Daiute, 1985; Hiltz, 1986; Selfe; Selfe & Wahlstrom, 1985; Taylor 1992).

The networked classroom encourages student-centered learning not only through a shift in authority, but also through a shift from a discourse of single channel communication towards one of multiple channels. In order for student voices to be recognized in the traditional classroom, they need to be funneled, one at a time, towards the instructor. This system restricts not only the number of people who may contribute to the discussion, but it also alienates those who are conversationally less aggressive. The networked classroom, on the other hand, allows for a discourse that is not only accessible to everyone (Regan, 1993), but also one in which the aggressive voices are subdued (Kiesler, Siegel, & McGuire, 1984; Selfe) and where the quieter students are more "vocal" (Barker and Kemp).

Besides providing more channels for communication, the networked classroom promotes a more egalitarian discourse through the removal of linguistic context cues. Allison Regan maintains that "people who are not favored by the traditional social hierarchy (for example, women, people of color, non-native English speakers, people with speech impediments) are more likely to join class discussions" (p. 12) in the networked classroom. Female students who are not favored by the context of the traditional classroom are on equal footing in the networked classroom. The shy student who is overcoming a speech impediment has just as much confidence in "speaking" to the class through the computer network as does the academically socialized English speaker in the traditional classroom. Other students whose dialects might be perceived as academically marginalized will also have the ability to discuss class topics in an open and egalitarian discourse.

If there is one trait, though, that truly provides the networked computer classroom for an opportunity of an egalitarian discourse, it is in the networks' ability to filter out not just linguistic cues, but all social cues that potentially block the free and unbiased exchange of information (Barker and Kemp; Eldred and Hawisher, 1995; Kiesler et. al., 1984; Selfe). Students have the ability to hold discussions without allowing one's gender, race, sexuality, physical appearance, position of authority, and even eye

contact restrict the free exchange of ideas. This social filter also allows students in the networked classroom to objectively and freely discuss issues such as race relations and gender roles.

The traits that make the network a promising sight of egalitarian discourse also make the network a sight which is more vulnerable to offensive and oppressive discourses. Offensive speech which is exaggerated by the technology, best observed in comments like "bitch" and "dyke," is the type of discourse which, in one form or another, has existed in the back rows of our classrooms and in the cinder-block rooms of the student dorms. It includes name-calling, as well as shallow expressions of sexism, racism, or homophobia. It might be a gesture that pokes fun at one's mother over a chat program, or it might be a simple comment that questions one's sexuality through the course listserv. It might be an angry student calling an author a "femi-nazi" or it might be a group of students calling another student a "fag." Typically, though, it is a discourse which, because of the network's shift in authority from the instructor to the student, access to multiple channels of communication (and, therefore, multiple audiences), and lack of linguistic cues, is amplified from the discursive undertones that already exist in the various student cultures present on campus towards the forefront of the classroom (and into the position of authority). The word "bitch" or "femi-nazi" now commands center stage.

The best way to prevent this type of discourse from occurring in our networked classrooms is to address the characteristics that facilitate this type of speech with our students. We may discuss with the students how the medium through which they are working is student-centered, and how students must take responsibility for keeping on task during class discussions. However, some first-year students might be unfamiliar with an academic discourse, in which case we can use our authority as instructor to guide the discussions by "creating an initial context for the discussion, setting norms, setting agenda, recognizing and prompting the participants, 'meta-commenting', or dealing with 'problems in context (Feenberg, 1989, p. 35). If we do not wish to assume the role of authority over the network, Betsy Bowen (1994) suggests having someone play the role of moderator to prevent conversations from becoming unfocused. In either case, we can prevent the networked discussions from becoming a unmoderated session of mob discourse.

We can also discuss with our students issues of audience and explain to them how their postings are reaching an audience that goes beyond the person to whom it was directed (Eldred; 1989). This might be a good time to discuss with our students how they may invoke an audience through their message and how they address an audience through the language that they use. We can tie this discussion in with the networks' ability to eliminate linguistic cues to further entrench the issue of audience awareness as we are composing on-line. Past transcripts can be used as a model to show the students how issues of audience and misunderstanding play out over the on-line medium. By discussing with our students the nature of the medium, we should be able to empower the students to conduct the classroom discussion in a more open, egalitarian discourse.

Despite our efforts at prevention, offensive remarks will slip into the network, leaving most instructors to consider the awkward decision of whether to intervene in the discussion or to "wait for students to challenge one another's bigotry and (one hopes) to convince each other that there are more productive ways to encounter difference than with fear or hatred" (Regan, p. 14). Diana George (1990) suggests printing the discourse and using it as a text for the class, thus sending a message to the students that their conversation is something that does have permanence. Feenberg suggests using the printed proceedings to "summarize the state of the discussion and to find unifying threads in the participants' comments" (p. 35). I believe that if the offensive speech is exaggerated by the network's shift in authority, the students' misperceptions of audience, or the lack of linguistic cues, I stop the class and address these issues as issues of language, of value assumptions behind words and of the social construction of words themselves. If, however, I sense that the discourse emerged through the technology to oppress rather than to simply offend, I use the discourse to demonstrate the oppressive nature of our patriarchal language and culture.

Oppressive discourse which emerges through the technology is the discourse of our uncensored patriarchal assumptions. Unlike the offensive speech that is exaggerated by certain characteristics of the technology, discourse which emerges through the technology moves beyond empty gestures that seek

attention and even beyond poor judgment concerning audience or academic discourse conventions. It is this discourse, according to Forman, that has found a space where "As a microcosm of the broader society, student groups can embody the tensions, born of differences in age, class, and race that themselves reflect cultural, political, and socioeconomic inequalities" (p.130). It is a discourse that takes advantage of the technology's ability to bridge the distance between writers, yet, at the same time, provide a social mask that allows writers certain degrees of anonymity. Thus, while the medium allows marginalized students to gain the attention of their audiences through their ideas and not through their marginalization, it also allows students to write statements or make comments that, in a face-to-face conversational context, would likely be spoken and quickly forgotten before any significant amount of reflection. This type of discourse which emerges through the technology is usually represented by comments concerning sexual advances towards women (Takayoshi, 1994) and group stereotyping that is based on attempted social dominance (Regan). While these statements might not have the connotative punch of their counterparts exaggerated by the technology, they are statements which seek to oppress rather than offend.

Certainly a lack of social cues allows students to compose on-line what they would perhaps censor in an actual printed text. The technology's ability to bridge speech and text facilitates a discourse that uncovers our unexamined cultural and institutional assumptions. Students perceive the medium as one of speech, which, for the most part, carries the assumption that what they say on-line has no permanence or lasting consequences (Hawisher and Moran). When writing on-line, we tend to compose quickly and without the "reflective scrutiny we usually give to the language we inscribe on paper." (p. 630). This new medium bridges the gap between spoken and written language (Hawisher and Moran, 1993). Furthermore, students find it much easier to ignore issues of audience while they are composing on-line (Selfe). As Peter Elbow (1968) argues, students are much more likely to write their honest thoughts and ideas when they are composing rapidly under the perception that there is no readily available audience. Therefore, the networked classroom asks students to respond quickly into a network in which there is no readily visible audience. Students who are hesitant about either committing to the written word or entering the social complexities of the spoken word will be more inclined to express their honest

thoughts and opinions over the computer network, which often turn out to be their unexamined cultural assumptions. While expressionists have long sought a type of composing in which the writer could bridge thought and speech and tune herself in with her uncensored thoughts and ideas, the technology exposes this type of embedded patriarchal discourse. Feminist theorists have demonstrated how cultural and institutional biases against women emerge through the technology (Flores, 1990; George; Takayoshi; Wahlstrom, 1994). For these instructors, assumptions of women's competence with technology and classroom authority reflect cultural assumptions that are deeply embedded within our society. Regan discusses how misperceptions of homosexuals that were presented over the network revealed a cultural limitation, and thus a cultural bias, in the language that our society uses to frame most discussions of homosexuality.

There are a few ways to prevent this type of oppressive discourse (if it is preventable at all) from emerging through the technology. Selfe describes how she makes her students wait for a period of time before responding on-line, thus allowing time for reflective thought. We can also situate the medium so that students are aware that their postings are much more than simple acts of speech (which for most students suggest that the postings have no permanence) by discussing how their postings are texts in themselves that can be read and interpreted (Daiute).

Language which emerges through the technology will inevitably rear its head in the networked classroom. However, if we are able to identify this type of discourse, we may turn it into a positive experience for our students. Selfe and Meyer (1991) seek ways to "better describe concepts like dominance and participation to identify linguistic structures and conversational phenomena that are most useful for describing power relationships" (p. 188). Faigley suggests that, on the positive side of the abusive language, students have a real lesson in the power of language (p.198). Regardless of how we approach this issue in our classrooms, Wahlstrom argues that we need to demonstrate to students that the misuse of networks may be the conscious or sub-conscious result of efforts to maintain existing social hierarchies. It may certainly be turned into a learning experience about the relationship between language and culture.

Distinguishing between offensive and oppressive language and tracing its path from thought towards composition is difficult, and largely contextual. There are no "rules," and we must largely decide for ourselves how to approach the problem of offensive and oppressive language in the networked classroom Yet, I believe that in order to facilitate and maintain room for an egalitarian discourse to occur in the networked classroom, we need to make an attempt to understand contexts of the discourses which arise in the networked classroom and turn them, if possible, into positive learning experiences for our students. While the egalitarian classroom may be the end result of the networked classroom, we need to be cautious and aware. According to Regan, "this 'open classroom' has its cost; at the same time as the networked classroom offers students opportunities to join in conversations, it also provides them with space to express themselves in ways that may close off communication" (p. 13).

Furthermore, in an effort to confront offensive and oppressive language, many universities have imposed both friendly speech codes and network usage agreements. The goals of these measurements are honorable--they simply want to provide everyone with an unthreatening environment to explore knowledge and to openly discuss issues. As practitioners in composition and rhetoric who are more than aware of the power of both the written and spoken word, these codes raise certain issues: Who defines offensive, oppressive, or threatening speech? Could the codes possibly trample on our students' first amendment rights? Is the prevention of speech the same as prevention of thought? Do the codes prepare our students for society? If the codes are successful in preventing speech, what valuable lessons do our students learn about the power of language and the need to demystify it in social contexts?

Because the field of composition and rhetoric is situated in a context in which we are concerned about all facets of language, in which we reach a large segment of the student body through first-year writing courses, and in which we have developed pedagogical tools that allow us to demonstrate issues of language use, we should seriously think about opening the dialogue on how instructors handle the issues of offensive, oppressive, and intimidating language. Maybe then we can pave the way for a truly egalitarian discourse. According to Flores, "It is possible to use computers to preserve and strengthen the

institutional status quo, or to use the technology as a means of change--in our approaches to teaching, learning, authority, power, and knowledge" (p. 107).

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